

Bringing Holmes the communication accolades with Meropa

 By Leigh Andrews

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Back in April, SA's largest independent national public relations consultancy, Meropa Communications, was again included in The Holmes Report's global annual ranking. Agency managing director Patrick Gearing weighs in.

Independent industry watchers, The Holmes Report, has again ranked companies by turnover and the number of employees in each firm. In the 2016 version of its recently published rankings, Meropa Communications features for the sixth time, coming in at 240 in the top 250, with annual turnover of US \$4,69m and 80 employees.

As SA's largest independent national public relations consultancy, Meropa is one of just two agencies on the list, and the only one judged on actual, not estimated, figures.

I spoke with Gearing about what it means to repeatedly make the list and whether it's true that "when the going gets tough, the tough go independent"...



Patrick Gearing, MD of Meropa.

■ ***Congrats on your sixth appearance on the list! Tell us how the Holmes Report ranking works and how you found out you'd been included.***

Firstly, let me recognise the sense of irony as Meropa boasts about this "accolade", as you well know that we don't enter awards on principle. It's important to note that The Holmes Report ranking is based on empirical research into the global PR industry. This is primarily what attracts us to it.



The reluctant hero

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The report tracks our industry by revenue with extensive interrogation of the players. Meropa has participated in the research for six years for the benefit of the report and the value of its insights for our industry and our business. We found out that we were in the top 250 again when the list was published.

■ ***What does your status as South Africa's largest independent national public relations consultancy mean?***

Meropa is a South African-owned, African agency. Our biggest competition comes from big multi-national PR groups; many of whom are ad-agency owned or linked – something we resist. The Holmes Report shows strong growth for independent agencies like ours, proving the truism that you have to be good locally first. Our independence allows us to be agile and adaptable: important factors as the way audiences consume content changes.

We provide the best possible specialist PR advice to clients without 'discipline interference' or the commercial constraints and big group complexities. Without the safety net of a big global shareholder, we have to deliver the best possible advice to retain clients.



Team Meropa

We are, empirically, the most-national PR agency in South Africa with owned offices in Johannesburg, Durban, Port Elizabeth and Cape Town. In South Africa, we don't have partners or affiliates or representatives somehow aligned to us: our national footprint allows a consistent Meropa experience, expertise and method wherever you hire us. We provide our own dedicated client-service teams wherever in South Africa our clients are.

■ ***Why is it then important that you were judged on actual, not estimated, figures?***

The value of The Holmes Report is its objective research, so it is only as good as the data it has. Estimated figures dilute the results. Only Meropa, of the two South African agencies, is ranked on actual data. We can say, empirically that we grew our revenue year-on-year by 15.5% in constant currency terms.

■ ***Impressive! Talk us through the trend of Independent PR firm growth comfortably outstripping your publicly-held peers.***

When the going gets tough, the tough go independent? The Holmes Report estimates global PR agency industry turnover at \$15bn, 7.4% up from \$14.2bn in 2015. The world's Top 10 account for \$5.1bn of that revenue -- but only grew by 3.3% on 2015.

The Holmes Report says that much of the rebound in growth can be attributed to "considerably improved performance by independent PR firms, who increased fee income by 9% on a constant currency basis to around \$5bn".

Independent PR firm growth comfortably outstripped their publicly held peers, a trend that has dominated recent PR industry history. It adds: "The fact that midsize independent firms continue to outperform the giant holding company agencies is clear evidence that the much-ballyhooed 'consolidation' of our industry is a chimera," and that: "clients are increasingly looking for best-in-breed agencies in individual markets and for individual audience segments. As PR comes to be seen as more and more mission critical, this trend will continue and expand."

Our growth demonstrates this trend – and our growth was nearly double the independent agency trend and five times that of the global behemoths. Global economic pressure creates more client demand for delivery. Being independent doesn't mean you can't be world-class and compete with the deep resources of public-held global agency groups either.

Throw in the changing demands of audiences as they consume content on multiple platforms, and the ability to creatively and strategically manage reputations, rather than big brand name agency reputation, becomes the key driver of success.

■ ***Explain why this form of recognition is more important than winning awards.***

We are only as good as our last piece of work. Hackneyed, but that's the piece of work that pays the bills. Our clients are our heroes and we are successful when we make a positive difference in their business – not when we put a trophy in the

boardroom.

Much of our reputation management work is hidden. It's about issues and activities our clients would not want us to talk about. We don't believe in getting between our clients and the footlights – so we don't enter industry awards.

If there are to be PR awards we would prefer an in-depth survey of agencies by their stakeholders: their clients, their staff, the media and their suppliers. That would give a much better idea of our value, but would be a difficult and costly exercise.

■ **Share a few global PR trends you're keen to embrace in the coming months.**

Our fundamental business hasn't changed. We need lots of stories to tell with lots of places to tell them. We have to create those stories in creative and compelling ways, on multiple, and different platforms – not least video and graphics and the 140-character op-ed – so that they become the conversations our audiences want to engage with. We also have a growing number of channels on which to tell them, ultimately being served up on demand.

So we will produce more and more video work to inform social media, primarily. We will also see a surge in engineering-owned platforms for content on demand.

Perhaps the most interesting trend is that of **unmediated content online** and how our counterparts in the media navigate that responsibility. Fake news is a real issue.



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Anyone can say anything they like about you or your company. Media and PR both have a responsibility to inform audiences with integrity.

It's clearly time for all parties involved to meet that responsibility. [Click here for more on Meropa and be sure to follow Meropa Communications' \[@MeropaPR Twitter feed\]\(#\) for the latest updates.](#)

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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